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INFO ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE

CONFIDENTIAL SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000660

E.O. 12356: DECL: OADR
TAGS: PGOV PINR SY
SUBJECT: THE INSCRUTABLE ASAD REGIME

11. CONFIDENTIAL - ENTIRE TEXT.

12. SUMMARY: RUSSIAN EMBASSY OFFICIALS, ALTHOUGH ENJOYING TIES OF LONG STANDING TO THE SYRIAN MILITARY/SECURITY ELITE, ARE, LIKE US, FINDING IT DIFFICULT TO SORT FACT FROM FICTION REGARDING THE AFTERMATH OF BASIL AL-ASAD'S DEATH. RUSSIAN DCM MIKHAIL BOGDANOV RELATED THEIR BELIEF THAT BASHAR AL-ASAD WAS THRUST TO THE FORE AFTER HIS FATHER LEARNED THAT TWO SENIOR COMMANDERS HAD INCREASED THE ALERT STATUS OF THEIR TROOPS IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING BASIL'S DEATH. THEY ALLEGEDLY DID SO IN ORDER TO ENSURE THAT RIF'AT DID NOT MOUNT A COMEBACK. BOGDANOV ALSO BELIEVED THAT MAJOR GENERAL KHALID HUSAYN, THE LONG-TIME COMMANDER OF ASAD'S BODYGUARDS, HAD BEEN RELIEVED OF HIS COMMAND FOR CHALLENGING THE AUTHORITY OF REPUBLICAN GUARD COMMANDER ADNAN MAKHLUF, THE PRESIDENT'S BROTHER-IN-LAW. AS FOR SUCCESSION SCENARIOS, THE RUSSIANS SEEM AS PUZZLED AS MOST, ALTHOUGH THEY CLEARLY HAVE BEEN DOING SOME SPECULATING OF THEIR OWN. THEY BELIEVE IN TENTATIVE FASHION THAT THE CLIQUE OF SENIOR ALAWITES AROUND ASAD WILL BE WARY ABOUT ALLOWING A SUNNI TO BECOME EVEN A FIGUREHEAD PRESIDENT, BUT NEITHER DO THEY SEE THE ALAWITE INNER CIRCLE AS HAVING ANYONE POSSESSING THE REQUISITE ATTRIBUTES TO LEAD A POST-ASAD SYRIA. THEY ARE NOW LOOKING AT SENIOR ALAWITE CIVILIANS ON THE REGIONAL COMMAND OF THE BA'TH PARTY. WE CONTINUE TO BELIEVE THAT IT IS FAR TOO EARLY TO FORECAST A LIKELY REPLACEMENT FOR PRESIDENT ASAD. END SUMMARY.

13. THE INTERNAL DYNAMICS OF THE MILITARY AND SECURITY ELITE AROUND PRESIDENT ASAD CONTINUE TO CHALLENGE SOME OF THE BEST POSITIONED DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS HERE, DESPITE THE REGIME'S 24 YEARS IN POWER. AMONG THOSE CONFIRMING THIS FACT (IN A MEETING WITH THE DCM FEBRUARY 2) IS RUSSIAN DCM MIKHAIL BOGDANOV, WHO HAS SPENT TWO LENGTHY TOURS HERE AND WHO HAS HAD ACCESS AT ONE TIME OR ANOTHER TO MANY SENIOR REGIME FIGURES. (BOGDANOV ACCOMPANIED RIF'AT AL-ASAD ON THE PLANE THAT TOOK HIM TO MOSCOW IN 1984 TO BEGIN HIS FIRST PERIOD OF EXILE. GENERALS ALI HAYDAR AND SHAFIQ FAYYAD WERE ALSO ON THAT FLIGHT, ALTHOUGH THEY, OF COURSE, WERE NOT EXILED.)

14. NEVERTHELESS, BOGDANOV ADMITTED THAT HIS EMBASSY REMAINED HARD PRESSED TO SORT OUT THE AFTERMATH OF BASIL AL-ASAD'S DEATH, PARTICULARLY AS IT AFFECTS REGIME SUCCESSION SCENARIOS. HE, TOO, BELIEVES THAT IT IS PREMATURE TO ASSUME THAT THE NEXT ELDEST SON, BASHAR, WILL BECOME AN IMPORTANT PLAYER, DESPITE THE RECENT PROMINENCE ACCORDED HIM AND HIS ASSUMPTION OF BASIL'S FORMER COMMAND AS HEAD OF A BRIGADE WITHIN THE REPUBLICAN GUARDS (SEE DAMASCUS 558). BOGDANOV BELIEVES, AS DO WE, THAT BASHAR'S ROLE MAY INITIALLY BE INTENDED TO KEEP REGIME RIVALRIES IN CHECK.

15. TO BUTTRESS HIS THESIS, BOGDANOV RELATED A STORY THAT WE HAVE NOT BEEN ABLE TO CONFIRM, TO THE EFFECT THAT THE NEW THIRD CORPS COMMANDER SHAFIQ FAYYAD AND SPECIAL FORCES COMMANDER ALI

HAYDAR RAISED THE ALERT STATUS OF THEIR TROOPS IMMEDIATELY AFTER LEARNING OF BASIL'S DEATH IN AN AUTO ACCIDENT. THE PRESIDENT, HEARING OF THEIR ACTION, ALLEGEDLY QUESTIONED THE REASONS FOR IT AND WAS TOLD THAT THEY FEARED RIF'AT MIGHT SOMEHOW TRY TO EXPLOIT THE SITUATION. IT WAS AT THIS POINT, THE RUSSIAN CONTENDED, THAT PRESIDENT ASAD MADE THE DECISION TO PUSH BASHAR TO THE FORE.

¶6. CONTINUING IN THIS VEIN, BOGDANOV ALSO RELATED TWO DIFFERENT RUMORS CONCERNING THE HEAD OF ASAD'S PERSONAL BODYGUARDS, KHALID HUSAYN, WHO HAS NOT BEEN SEEN SINCE SHORTLY AFTER THE ACCIDENT. ONE RUMOR WAS THAT HE SUFFERED A HEART ATTACK (WE HAD ALREADY HEARD THIS ONE); THE SECOND VERSION WAS THAT HE HAD ASSERTED FOR HIMSELF A POSITION SUPERIOR TO REPUBLICAN GUARD COMMANDER (AND ASAD BROTHER-IN-LAW) ADNAN MAKHLUF AND BEEN RELIEVED OF HIS DUTIES AS A RESULT. (COMMENT: WHATEVER THE FACTS, KHALID HUSAYN APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN GUARDING PRESIDENT ASAD AGAIN ON FEBRUARY 6, DURING KING HUSSAYN'S VISIT TO DAMASCUS.)

¶7. ALTHOUGH THE RUSSIANS WERE NOT AT QARDAHA FOR THE FUNERAL SERVICE, UPON HEARING FROM US THAT GENERAL ADNAN AL-ASAD, A NEPHEW OF THE PRESIDENT HAD BEEN IN CHARGE OF THE ARRANGEMENTS (SUCH AS THEY WERE), BOGDANOV CLAIMED THAT ADNAN'S ONCE BRIGHT STAR AS HEAD OF THE "STRUGGLE COMPANIES" WAS IN ECLIPSE. HE FINGERED HIM AND GHAZI KAN'AN, THE SYRIAN INTELLIGENCE CZAR IN LEBANON, AS BOTH DISAPPOINTED AT HAVING BEEN PASSED OVER ON THE LATEST PROMOTION LIST. (COMMENT: WE DO NOT BELIEVE THAT THESE TWO FARED ANY WORSE THAN MOST OF THEIR PEERS IN THE LATEST PROMOTION CYCLE.)

¶8. IN SPEAKING OF CLOSE FAMILY MEMBERS OF PRESIDENT ASAD, BOGDANOV RELATED ANOTHER RUMOR THAT HAS BEEN CIRCULATING: THE REASON THE YOUNGEST ASAD CHILD, MAJID, HAD NOT BEEN AT THE FUNERAL WAS THAT HE, HIMSELF, HAD BEEN IN A CAR ACCIDENT A COUPLE OF WEEKS EARLIER AND HAD REQUIRED HOSPITALIZATION IN GERMANY. PRESIDENT ASAD HAD ASKED BASIL TO LOOK AFTER MAJID'S NEEDS, HENCE THAT IS WHY BASIL WAS SPEEDING TO CATCH THE FRIDAY MORNING LUFTHANSA FLIGHT TO FRANKFURT. (COMMENT: WE, TOO, HEARD THE STORY OF MAJID'S ACCIDENT, BUT SEEMINGLY MORE RELIABLE INFORMATION SUGGESTS THAT THIS STORY WAS INTENDED TO COVER MAJID'S DRUG REHABILITATION TREATMENT IN GERMANY.)

¶9. AS FOR SUCCESSION, BOGDANOV ADMITTED THAT HIS EMBASSY WAS AS BEREFT OF RELIABLE INFORMATION AS MOST OTHERS. HE THOUGHT THAT THE CLIQUE OF ALAWITE SENIOR OFFICERS WOULD SEE IT AS TOO THREATENING TO ALLOW A PROMINENT REGIME SUNNI, SUCH AS VICE PRESIDENT KHADDAM OR ARMED FORCES CHIEF OF STAFF SHIHABI, TO ASCEND TO THE PRESIDENCY. EVEN A FRONT MAN COULD GET IDEAS. YET, BOGDANOV CLAIMED, HE WAS HARD PRESSED TO IDENTIFY A SENIOR ALAWITE OFFICER WITH THE STATURE, POLITICAL EXPERIENCE, AND REPUTATION TO SUCCEED ASAD. GENERAL MAKHLUF LACKED THE DIRECT COMBAT EXPERIENCE OF HIS PEERS. RIF'AT REMAINED A DIVISIVE FIGURE. WHEN ASKED ABOUT DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF ALI ASLAN, BOGDANOV SAID THAT HE MAY HAVE BEEN "RETIRED" BUT ALLOWED TO STAY ON AN EXTRA YEAR. AT THE MOMENT BOGDANOV UNDERSTOOD ASLAN WAS PREOCCUPIED WITH THE HEALTH OF A SON WHO WAS IN DANGER OF DYING FROM A LONG-TERM ILLNESS (UNSPECIFIED).

¶10. BOGDANOV SAID THAT IN HIS EMBASSY'S MUSINGS ON A POSSIBLE SUCCESSOR IZZ AL-DIN NASIR WAS TOUTED AS A REAL CONTENDER. WHEN ASKED WHY NASIR, THE LONG-TIME PRESIDENT OF THE GENERAL CONFEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS, WAS SEEN AS A CONTENDER, BOGDANOV REPLIED THAT HE MET THE

CONSTITUTIONAL REQUIREMENT OF MEMBERSHIP ON THE REGIONAL COMMAND OF THE BA' TH PARTY; ENJOYED THE SUPPORT OF SEVERAL SENIOR ALAWITE OFFICERS, MOST IMPORTANTLY SMI CHIEF ALI DUBA; WAS POPULAR AMONG THE PARTY RANK AND FILE; AND, OF COURSE, WAS AN ALAWITE.

111. COMMENT: WE REPORT BOGDANOV'S OBSERVATIONS PRECISELY BECAUSE THEY ARE RATHER UNREMARKABLE, PARTICULARLY COMING FROM A VETERAN SYRIA WATCHER WHO HAS HAD DIRECT ACCESS OVER THE YEARS TO SENIOR MILITARY OFFICIALS AND TO THE REPORTS OF THE LARGE SOVIET ADVISORY GROUP THAT HAS WORKED WITH THE SYRIAN ARMED FORCES. BOGDANOV CLEARLY WAS HAVING THE SAME PROBLEMS MOST OF HIS DIPLOMATIC COLLEAGUES HAVE ENCOUNTERED IN SIFTING FACT FROM FICTION IN A SOCIETY WHERE INFORMATION IS AS TIGHTLY CONTROLLED AS WAS FORMERLY THE CASE IN SOME OF THE MORE REPRESSIVE EASTERN EUROPEAN STATES. THE RUSSIAN EMBASSY APPEARS GENUINELY UNABLE TO LAY ODDS ON POSSIBLE SUCCESSORS IN THE WAKE OF BASIL'S UNTIMELY DEMISE. ALL OF THE FOREGOING SUGGESTS TO US THAT A HEALTHY DOSE OF HUMILITY, CAUTION, AND SKEPTICISM IS CALLED FOR IN HANDICAPPING THE SUCCESSION SWEEPSTAKES.

112. AMBASSADOR'S COMMENT: AT A FEBRUARY 1 DINNER MEETING OF THE RUSSIAN, FRENCH, BRITISH, EGYPTIAN, AND US AMBASSADORS, RUSSIAN AMBASSADOR ZOTOV SHARED MOST OF BOGDANOV'S INFORMATION AND MUSINGS AS HIS OWN, AGAIN WITH LITTLE SENSE OF HOW ANY SUCCESSION SCENARIO MIGHT PLAY OUT. WITH THE EXCEPTION OF BRITISH AMBASSADOR GREEN, WHO BELIEVES THAT RIF'AT AL-ASAD COULD PROVE TO BE THE ALAWITES' RALLYING-POINT WHEN HAFIZ AL-ASAD PASSES AWAY, NONE OF THE AMBASSADORS PRESENT WAS PREPARED TO PUT FORTH ANYTHING APPROACHING A DEFINITIVE VIEW OF THE SUCCESSION.

ROSS